



New arrivals - think of it this way

Did you know?

- **Australia has a proud migrant history**
- **Asylum levels in Australia are lower than the rest of the world**
- **We are responsible for protecting people who are fleeing persecution**
- **There is no preferential treatment when it comes to housing – people fend for themselves in the private rental market**

The current population of Australia incorporates a significant number of migrants and many of them now have children and grandchildren who were born here. We also have a considerable history of providing a country to call home, asylum and protection for people facing war and persecution in their native lands. In the 19th and early 20th centuries, Europeans facing religious and political oppression and tyranny settled in Australia as unassisted migrants (RCOA, 2012).¹ Following World War II there began a more organised program of migration to Australia² that developed into a highly coordinated series of strategies and a refugee policy in the late 1970s in response to the refugee crisis in the wake of the Vietnam War (RCOA, 2012; OXFAM, 2007). In the late 20th and early 21st centuries refugees are fleeing from a multitude of conflicts in Asia, Africa and the Middle-East, which is reflected in the 37% increase in registered asylum claims to Australia from 2011 to 2012 (UNHCR, 2012). Despite this increase **asylum levels in Australia remain comparatively lower** than those recorded by other countries (UNHCR, 2012).

As a member of the international community, Australia has a **responsibility to protect people** fleeing persecution. What is often overlooked however, are the valuable contributions that humanitarian entrants³ make to our way of life (Hugo, 2011). In a study of first and second generation humanitarian entrants to Australia, Hugo (2011) found that they had high rates of employment, civic engagement and played a significant role in contributing to labour shortages. In

¹ Given that they complied with the conditions outlined in the *Immigration (Restriction) Act 1901*, the cornerstone of the *White Australia Policy*.

² Directed by the *Immigration (Restriction) Act 1901* that allowed only European and Anglo humanitarian entrants to settle in Australia.

³ People seeking asylum in Australia who have been granted refugee status via a protection visa (classes 200, 201, 202, 203, 204, 866).

fact, the study found that second generation humanitarian entrants exceeded average Australian levels of social and economic contributions (Hugo, 2011).



We can all remember the very strong work ethic of the Italian, Chinese, Vietnamese and Greek migrants and just how hard it was for them to establish themselves and their families. Accommodated in corrugated iron Nissan huts with bare floors, the market gardeners in Virginia, toiled the land until it became one of the most productive vegetable-growing districts in South Australia. Italians also grew fresh produce and have provided us with a love of espresso coffee, pasta and pizza and we can all enjoy a cosmopolitan feel in the City in streets like Gouger Street with a multitude of international flavours and products on offer.



Today, refugees and asylum seekers are overwhelmingly viewed as a cohort of people who increase competition for scarce resources and who are seen as being very different to “us” - the white, dominant culture. People who seek asylum in Australia are often greeted with assumptions and racist attitudes stemming from fears engendered by geo-political terror events and contestations over nationalism that proceed from mainstream Australian insecurities (Bulbeck, 2004; Hage, 2003; McMaster, 2002). We should welcome people with open arms to this lucky country – think of the babies and children who desperately need a safe home, regardless of how they arrive here.

The scramble for scarce resources like housing and employment is an important factor in the largely unsympathetic environment that refugees face in Australia. Conceptions of deservedness are often based on nationality, and in these circumstances people who were not born in Australia are judged unworthy. These opinions are levelled against more recent refugees instantaneously, based on their appearance – earlier European migrants and humanitarian entrants were white.

The old saying “when in Rome do as the Romans do” reflects a universal requirement to fit in with majority groups and dominant cultural norms. The divisiveness of difference and one of the most common vernacular criticisms of culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) people is that they must assimilate with western culture. “If they come to Australia”, people often claim, “they should learn ‘our’ ways”. Of course these people often overlook the fact that ‘we’ are largely a migrant population ourselves and that ‘our’ ways have been imported, adapted and modified as a result of complex cultural interactions over time. Despite the obviousness of this argument, mainstream Australian society still expects migrants to assimilate and generally refute their foreign practices and beliefs. This includes assumptions about how people access, live in and maintain their homes.

There are many accounts of refugees and asylum seekers being excellent tenants, however these stories are premised on the fulfilment of Western expectations. For example:

“Her rent is always paid on time, her house is presented immaculately and she never misses an appointment.”

“The lawn [is] perpetually clipped short.”

“He has always paid his rent on time and always kept the unit clean and tidy.”

“She always paid her rent on time [and] presented her home immaculately for all formal inspections...you could see where she had made extra effort.”

To be a good tenant you must present your home in a particular way and ensure that rent is paid on time. This seems like common sense. *Of course* this is the way that one maintains a house. But it is the taken-for-granted nature of this assumption that **should set off alarm bells**. Anything that is taken-for-granted is socio-culturally informed and so deeply ingrained in the beliefs and practices of the major proportion of the population that it seems to be a universally-accepted truth. It must be remembered that mainstream Australian expectations of how people live in and maintain their homes are relative to the Australian social and cultural context. This means that in other places around the world there are different ways of maintaining homes that are relative to the relevant social and cultural contexts. When CALD people migrate to Australia and search for new homes they must learn new behaviours that are relative to an alien culture - they are not doing anything wrong - relatively speaking, they are living with new and different expectations in a strange and sometimes hostile new land. By all accounts new migrants to Australia strive to learn the expected practices of living in Australia and make excellent tenants in Australian terms.

Migrants to Australia **do not get preferential treatment when it comes to housing – this is a myth** and speaks more to the conflicts that are created when different groups of people are competing for scarce resources (affordable housing), rather than any actual unfairness or bias. People who are on protection visas in South Australia are granted residency and are entitled to the same assistance as other Australians. This means that they are eligible to apply for public and community housing, bond and rent assistance from Housing SA and support from Centrelink. The waiting list for social housing contains over 20,000 applicants, and migrants have little chance of being housed this way. On the other hand, people who are living in the community on bridging visas **are entitled to very little and have barely enough to live on**. They get 89% of the Centrelink benefit and must find housing in the private rental market. For single people this equates to \$220 per week. People on bridging visas are not allowed to work to supplement their meagre incomes since the Federal

decision to restrict work rights as a disincentive to people seeking asylum in Australia and are also required to pay full fees for education and services as though they were international students or visitors.

People from other cultures who arrive in Australia need education about how to maintain a house and be successful in their westernised tenancies. The Shelter SA Agencies Supporting Housing for Refugees and Asylum Seekers (ASHRA) is a network that brings together people providing support services including tenancy education - many members comment that teaching has to occur at a point in time when people both need and are ready to synthesise information. If advice is to be successfully conveyed, it must be done so at the most opportune times when it has a better chance of being understood and put into practice.

Shelter SA is paying attention to the way they write and talk about minority groups to avoid reinforcing negative stereotypes that dehumanise people and create a “them” and “us” situation. George Lakoff⁴ says, ‘...**when you are arguing against the other side: Do not use their language.** Their language picks out a frame-and it won’t be the frame you want.’ Frames are worldviews that are evoked by language – when you use a negative frame in your argument you are actually enforcing the very worldview that you want to change. Lakoff says that reframing, which requires you to speak differently, can change the way that people see the world and it is hoped that people will consider their views on migrants in a more positive and human light. For more information please contact Shelter SA or go to our website www.sheltersa.asn.au.

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References

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⁴ George Lakoff is an American cognitive linguist. His book that I’m referring to is *Don’t Think of an Elephant!* – a book about the 2004 American election, during which he acted as an advisor to the Democratic Party.

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